PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 16 Number 10 October 2019

OUTSTATION TRIP: 12th-13th October 2019: Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary. Trip Coordinators: Gowthama Poludasu (Mobile: 9440910967); Srikanth Bhamidipati (Mobile: 9738840070); Sudhir Moorti (Mobile: 9652283335)

Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary is in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh and covers an area of 6.14 square kilometres. It was established in 1988 to protect the now critically endangered Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican. Rollapadu is also home to the handsome Blackbuck and several interesting bird species. Seats are limited. Please contact the coordinators to book your seat, as well as for further details regarding the trip.

INDOOR MEETING: Talk on "Reptile Apex Predators" by Jayaram Krishnan. Friday, 11th October 2019, 6.00PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Bangalore-based wildlife enthusiast Jayaram Krishnan teaches Coaching Entrepreneurs how to apply the lessons from wildlife for survival and success in their daily lives. During his talk, he will give an overview about crocodiles, snakes and large lizards and their behaviour, habitat, diet and identification methods. Do make it a point to attend this interesting talk.

We wish all our members a very happy Deepavali

A SMALL BEGINNING
Report – Ameenpur Lake Clean-up, September 10, 2019

Rama Sarvani

A scene at Ameenpur Lake (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

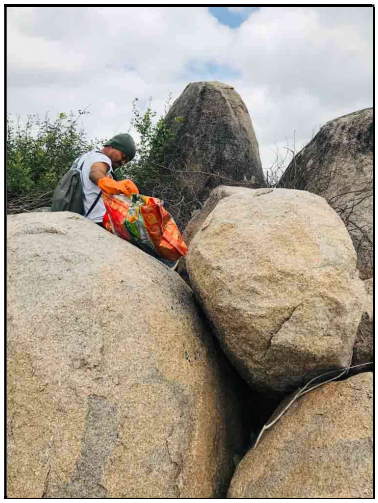
An eventful and enlightening, but tiring, day finally came to an end. It had left an indelible mark on me; memories that have probably changed me in profound ways. For instance, when I stopped at the supermarket today evening to buy some 'essentials', all I could think of were the single-use plastics and the likes that have come to be such an integral part of our daily lives. Shampoos, lotions, deodorants… Can I stop using all that? It seems impossible, right? Well, not if every time I hold one, instead of the shiny hair, flawless skin and incredible confidence these products supposedly give me, I see their empty containers littered on the shores of a pristine water body, our very own Ameenpur Lake!

We, a group of four friends with a shared interest in birdwatching – Ram, Raghu, Deepa and myself – decided to put this holiday weekday to maximum use. However, today's trip to Ameenpur was special. Usually armed only with our binoculars and cameras, this time we also brought along a pair of gloves each and some trash bags.

Spot-billed Pelicans relaxing on the rock islands (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

Greater Flamingos taking flight (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

Several beautiful birds, including Pelicans and Flamingos, call Ameenpur Lake their home. Every trip to this incredible urban bird haven would leave us both bewildered by the biodiversity it hosts, and disappointed by what humans have done, and are doing, to the place. During our last trip we had resolved to do something about it; today, we took the plunge (quite literally) and ended up collecting six big bags of trash from a small part of the lakeshore. Sadly, the diversity of trash could easily give the birds a run for their money – we counted several polythene bags, plastic water bottles, liquor bottles, and pieces of thermocol apart from the odd pairs of footwear we managed to fish out of the water. Oh, and did I tell you we also found a discarded helmet?!



Raghu salvaging a waste polythene bag from the boulders to be used for trash collection (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

Some portion of the total trash we managed to collect

Bearing the pain that came with confronting the reality of the state in which we find our precious wetland ecosystems, I started posing some questions to myself. Why don't people think twice before throwing their trash into a lake? Why don't people come out of their comfort zone to avoid using plastic? How do we solve this problem? I have no clue what the answers are going to be, but when we next went to the Pragati Nagar dump yard, ironically located right next to another lake, I did get a perspective about the city's waste removal system: Composting, waste segregation for recycling, incineration, the inability to dispose of certain kinds of waste (notably thermocol and flammable cans like deodorants) – and the crippling issues faced by Hyderabad's waste management system.

An Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark uses rocks as a lookout to survey its territory (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

One such rock, which was covered with glass pieces from broken liquor bottles (Photo: Rama Sarvani)

Liquor bottles collected as part of the trash (Photo: Raghu SR)

Part of the dump yard, overlooking Pragati Nagar Lake
(Photo: Rama Sarvani)

What we did today is not something extraordinary. Many other groups have carried out such cleanliness drives before. When we go out for birding, we expect to watch birds in their element, doing 'bird' things in their pristine habitats. Instead, seeing them entangled in nets and watching them suffer and die, I expect, would bring out the humane side in each one of us. In a moment of whimsical clarity, we decided to clean up a portion of Ameenpur. Although we faced some challenges along the way – garbage bags coming undone, municipal workers stopping us at the entrance of the dump, etc – we used them to learn and equip ourselves with the requisite information for future clean-ups.

The dump yard in-charge, Mr Ratnam Raju, who was extremely friendly, gave us a tour of the dump yard and explained the nitty-gritties of waste management on location. He encouraged us and welcomed the possibility of more such clean-up drives across the city's lakes.

What we did in one day was not even a tiny portion of what we, as responsible citizens and birdwatchers, are capable of accomplishing. I am certain that this is only a small beginning. We have a long road ahead. So, the real question is: Are we going to do something about it? Or just like any other issue, do we say "that's the most we can do" and get on with our lives?

The team with Mr Ratnam Raju (second from right)
(Photo: Rama Sarvani)

Things to keep at hand and in mind for a hassle-free clean-up:

- *Use good quality trash bags, preferably reusable ones. Each large bag can hold up to 5 kg of plastic trash. (Caution: Poor quality polythene bags can get easily torn from stray glass pieces! They may also result in leaching of garbage.)*
- *Wear a pair of sturdy, waterproof gloves.*
- *Use gumboots and poles, if you are planning to collect trash floating on water.*
- *Carry ropes or twine to tie off the bags once they are filled.*
- *Use a separate bag for intact glass bottles. Segregate waste material on the spot as much as possible.*
- *Thermocol wastes aren't accepted at dump yards. So, segregate them and make alternative arrangements for their disposal.*
- *Do not dispose of batteries or pressurized containers like deodorants in the dump yard.*
- *Inform the in-charge of a nearby dump yard at least a day before your planned clean-up. Ideally, permission for dumping at the yard must be sought from the Corporator.*
- *Carry a hand sanitizer. It is likely that you will feel hungry in between the clean-up!*

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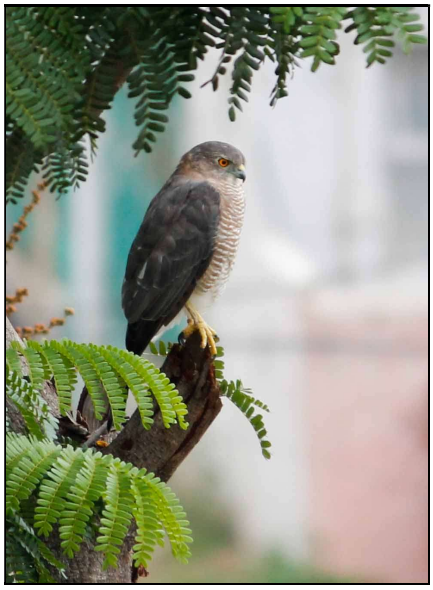
TREASURE TROVE IN MY BACKYARD

Part-2

Text and Photos: Ambika Pradhan



Shikra

How people spend so much of their lives so utterly oblivious to the beauty of birds, I will never understand. If you saw the world with my eyes, you'd be dunked in love for birds. I'm beginning to lose track of the number of times flocks of birds have kept me company on days when I felt incredibly low. This may be my personal superstition, but I'd like to believe that it's some kind of sign of the good things yet to come. And being surrounded with birds, these good signs come pretty often. Over the years, I've realised that once you start your pursuit for birds, or once your eyes actually open up to the world of birding, you can NEVER un-see a bird. There's always that one bird that keeps you company, wherever you go. And now, trips without having an opportunity to watch birds don't seem like productive trips at all!

Right from my childhood, I've been raised in an area that is a stone's throw away from Safilguda Lake. But it is only in my late teens that I actually started looking at the everyday beauty that birds are. And ever since, I haven't stopped looking! The world is a better and so much more interesting place when your vision opens up to the life of birds.

The Raven's Claw

One striking memory takes me back to my very first days of birding, nearly 6-7 years ago, when I had just started identifying common birds through their calls. One morning, as I was going about my routine, a persistent screeching call greeted me from the balcony. It was a call the likes of which I had never heard. As I rushed out to see what bird it was, I noticed a crow, which, to my surprise, wasn't the source of the screech. On further inspection, looking for the source of the call, I found a tiny bat grappling for its life in the crow's claw. Out in broad daylight, the crow perched on a thin electric wire with a bat in its claws, pecking at it occasionally, as the bat screeched for its life!

Soon, the bat managed to free itself, swiftly flying into the thick canopy of a nearby tree. But the crow was close on its heels, chasing it through the canopy. The chase lasted nearly for 10 minutes, before the crow let out a groan and gave up!

That day, as I lost myself in the moment, I forgot to dash inside for the point-and-shoot I had back then, at least to document whatever I could of the moment. Looking back, I really wish I had had a camera handy that day!

Casual Tenants

Over the years, I have made so many futile attempts to get Munias and Sparrows to nest in the balcony of my apartment. So many small wooden boxes, disguised as nests were placed strategically so that my winged tenants would feel at home. But everything failed and for a long time, no bird nested in the balcony. But my hopes were finally fulfilled when a Scaly-breasted Munia couple finally started placing small twigs in the little nook between the wall and the A/C component in the balcony. Any initial attempts by my family to remove it was met with fierce hostility and warnings – from yours truly!

Scaly-breasted Munia

Every day, I'd be delighted to find more dried blades of grass as the nest-making process picked up speed. For nearly 2 months, I woke up to the chirping of the Munias. What an honour it was, to share the heath with these creatures and to have them feel so perfectly safe in my space. And when the chicks hatched, I just couldn't contain my happiness!

Every day, I would watch them grow. With each day's passing, I would worry that I wouldn't be able to catch a glimpse of the fledglings taking their first flight (like a parent worried about missing their child's first steps!)

But one eventful afternoon, as I stepped into my balcony, I found all the 3 fledglings trying to take flight, coming out of the nest one after the other. What a feeling that was, to have the honour of witnessing the very first flight of a bird's life!

I am very certain no special sighting can ever replace the happiness I felt that day, witnessing this magical moment. I felt as if the fledglings had waited all along for me to witness the event! As the first fledgling took off, it flew clumsily, perching just a foot away from me, before it took off for good. Slowly, the other two flew away too. But to think that there was some kind of telepathy, as if they had heard my deepest desires to see them take flight, still warms up my heart.

Now that the Munia pair is back to nesting in my balcony after a year, I cannot wait for more magical sightings to happen right in my treasure trove backyard!

* * *

Who Am I?

(Part-4)

Srikanth Bhamidipati

1. This bird is an attention-grabber, and those who claim this amazing bird as their totem will attest to its ability to shake up awareness. Nothing breaks the silence of a hike in the woods like the urgent, rapid-fire percussion of this bird's rapping against a tree. Many believe that when this bird comes pecking, it is a call for us to return to our roots, back to the womb of our ideas and use our intellect and discernment to follow through with our plans.

2. It isn't hard to understand why this modest, reclusive, mysterious bird became associated with the uncanny. Its associated myths pre-date Aristotle, who recorded them, and throughout Europe folklore insisted that this bird stole milk from goats' udders – earning it the name Goatsucker, by which it is known in many places, from Spain to Russia. It is also called 'Corpse Fowl' and 'Puckeridge' – the birds were also wrongly accused of pecking the hides of cattle and causing the disease called Puckeridge (a condition actually caused by the Warble Fly which lays its eggs under the skin's surface).

3. These birds are associated with water and rain by many tribes, such as the Blackfoot, and the silhouette of this bird with its neck stretched vertically is sometimes used as a symbol for water in Native American art. In some Athabaskan flood stories, this species helped to end the Great Flood by swallowing the flood waters and then spewing them out in the form of rivers. They are also used as clan animals in some Native American cultures. One such tribe is the Chippewa.

4. This species is surrounded with several symbolic meanings and myths. Come to think of it, these meanings must have originated from the bird's behaviour. For example, the bird is rarely seen in a flock, leading it to be considered as a symbol of solitude. These freshwater and coastal birds are known for their long legs, long neck, and harpoon-like beak. However, these birds are known for their symbolic meanings as well. This bird symbolizes Grace, Noble Stature, Calmness, Solitude, Longevity, Intelligence, Strength, Independence etc. The list can go on.

Different cultures possess different symbolic meanings about this bird. According to Greek mythology, these birds were thought to be messengers of God. Therefore, in many cultures, it is considered wrong to shoot them, as that brings you bad luck. Many people believe that dreaming about this species brings back their lost possession.

5. This bird is a religious symbol of mercy and self-sacrifice. Legend has it that a mother bird would feed her chicks on blood from her own chest if there was not enough food to feed them.

Please choose your answers from the following options:

- Pelican
- Sparrow
- Woodpecker
- Pigeon
- Swallow
- Heron
- Bittern
- Owl
- Nightjar
- Crane

Please send your answers **by email** to umeshmani1@gmail.com on or before November 10, 2019. Members who give all correct answers will be acknowledged in the next issue of the Pitta. This is the **concluding part of this series** – so don't miss your chance to participate!

Answers to Part-3:

1. Eagle
2. Swan
3. Indian Roller
4. Peafowl
5. Blood Pheasant

Members who responded to Part-3 : Responses were received from Jayasurya Pathapati, who got 3 answers right. Thank you for your participation!

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DECCAN BIRDERS' ANNUAL FLOCKING
Report – Annual Dinner, September 28, 2019

Surekha Aitabathula

Seventy happy folks were on the same page on the 28th of September, 2019 at the Deccan Birders Annual Dinner. It was a night of flocking, bonding, chirping, watching and listening together. Those of us who usually meet in birding gear in forests met each other in a festive let-your-hair-down kind of environment.

The function began with the welcome address by Bharadwaj, who delineated the activities of Deccan Birders. After the welcome address the floor was thrown open for the Chief Guest Kalyan Varma's presentation on various aspects of nature.

Kalyan Varma (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

A bit about the renowned Chief Guest. Kalyan Varma is a wildlife photographer, film maker, naturalist and explorer who quit his IT job in Yahoo and promised himself to work full-time for wildlife. He freelances with many of the world's leading magazines, environmental NGOs and television channels like National Geographic and BBC. Vizag-born, Bangalore-based Kalyan has, over the last decade, worked on blue chip wildlife series for the BBC and the National Geographic Channel. His work has appeared in many publications world-wide, such as National Geographic, Nature, The Guardian, BBC Wildlife, GEO, Smithsonian and Lonely Planet.

Kalyan addressing the gathering (Photo: Bharadwaj Korni)

India Nature Watch, which he co-founded with a team of photographers, has today become the largest platform for upcoming wildlife photographers in Asia. He is also the co-founder of Asia's largest nature photography festival Nature InFocus.

He has made several films and nature documentaries like the *Brahmaputra - Sky River of the Himalayas* series, *Wonders of the Monsoon*, *Secrets of Wild India: Tiger Jungles, Wildest India: Western Ghats* and *Million Snake Bites.*

His recent film *Wild Karnataka* has won much acclaim. His latest outing, *The Swamp Tigers of Sunderbans*, on which he spent 600 hours of shooting, has been nominated for the Emmys this year.

The engrossed audience (Photo: Bharadwaj Korni)

With such an accomplished speaker, the packed house listened in rapt attention to Kalyan's compelling narrative. The opening statement of his presentation – that he is basically a story teller – was apt: he went to share many slices of life in the wild through his stunning visuals. For instance, how the wolves follow the shepherd and his sheep; how an elephant that trampled a ten-year-old girl and devastated her family found that its own family got disturbed too. He showed powerful visuals of a hapless elephant's agony and trauma during capture.

Kalyan interacting with the audience
(Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Kalyan also showed us the trailer of his film *Wild Karnataka*, which has galloping music and tremendously rich visuals. The presentation concluded with a small clip on the making of his film *The Swamp Tigers of Sunderbans*.

Kalyan receiving a memento from Aasheesh Pittie
(Photo: Bharadwaj Korni)

After his talk, everyone trooped down to the dinner gallery where four best photographs taken by about ten of our members were displayed. Kalyan was taken around the gallery and introduced to the photographers.

The photo display (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

The photo display adorning the wall was much appreciated by one and all. Finally, after a sumptuous dinner and much camaraderie, warm good nights, handshakes and smiles were exchanged with a promise to rejoice again at the next flocktail.

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Trip Report – Pashamylaram/Patancheru/Ameenpur Lakes, August 31, 2019

Dr G Samuel Sukumar

A view of Patancheru Lake (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

On August 31st 2019, three of us – Mr Shafaat Ulla, Thomas Rajendra Prasad and I – decided to visit the Pashamylaram Lake, located about 47 km from Hyderabad on NH-65, and 8.9 km beyond Patancheru Lake. This lake is located in the industrial area of Pashamylaram. The main purpose of this visit was a reported sighting of a large flock of Greater Flamingos by Mr Vijay Kumar.

It was raining lightly when we started at 6.30AM. Passing through the industrial area we reached the lake edge, only to be disappointed as there was no trace of any flamingos anywhere in the lake. An Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark was seen hovering above, and a pair of Spot-billed Ducks flew around at a distance. Shafaatsaab said that if the flamingos had been seen in such large numbers earlier, they must be visiting nearby lakes.

The industrial area was covered with smog and a nauseating smell, so we decided to move on and have a look at a couple of other lakes – Patancheru and Ameenpur.

Black-headed Ibis and Grey Heron
(Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

We reached Patancheru Lake, where we were welcomed by a Grey Heron and an Ibis which were attracted by fish waste in the banks. A lone rock outcrop in the water had a Darter preening its wet feathers. Photographs of the Darter showed something around its beak, possibly its own feathers.

Darter (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Baya Weaver at work (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Walking on the bank, we saw Baya Weavers busily weaving their nests, Asian Openbills, Common Coot, Little Grebes in breeding plumage, Spot-billed Pelicans and a few Flamingos.

Little Grebe (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Asian Openbill (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

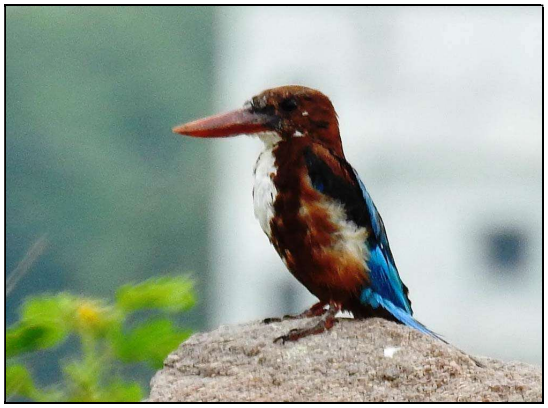
Presence of some of the Flamingos indicated we were getting closer to the large flock. So we then moved to the Ameenpur Lake. As we stopped at the bund temple, we saw a pair of Flamingos very close to the shore.

Greater Flamingo (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Spot-billed Pelican, Darter and other birds
(Photo: Thomas Rajendra Prasad)

Driving beside the bund to reach the lake bed, we saw Spot-billed Pelicans in the first small water body, along with Purple Swamphens and Coots. At the main lake, we saw a lone White-breasted Kingfisher on a granite boulder and a Pied Bushchat.

Eurasian Spoonbill (Photo: Thomas Rajendra Prasad)



White-throated Kingfisher (Photo: Thomas Rajendra Prasad)

Pied Bushchat (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

At a distance we could see the large flock of about 200-plus Greater Flamingos in the lake. So what we had presumed earlier turned out to be true: these large flocks appeared to be moving around between these three lakes.

Painted Stork adult and juvenile (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

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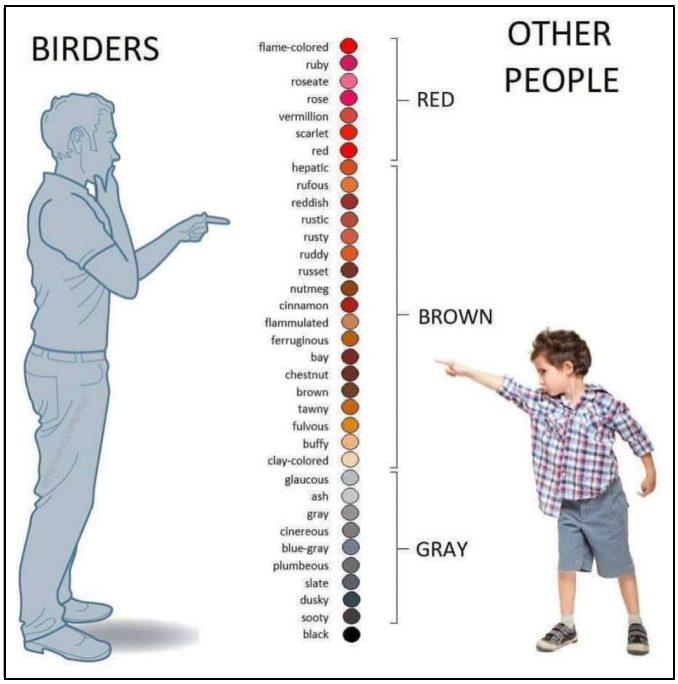
Bird Humour

Umesh Mani



(Post by Tucson Audubon Society on Instagram, August 2019)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Black Bittern (*Ixobrychus flavicollis*)

Black Bittern

Black Bittern in its habitat

(Krishna Delta, January 5, 2019)

Order: Pelecaniformes
Family: Ardeidae
Genus: *Ixobrychus*
Species: *I. flavicollis*
Size: 54-66 cm

Description & distribution: The Black Bittern is by far the largest member of its genus *Ixobrychus*. It is a dark grey, sooty black or dark brown Bittern having uniformly black upperparts with a bluish sheen and buff-tipped wing coverts, while the underparts are whitish heavily streaked with brown. A loose tuft of elongated feathers on the foreneck may overhang the upper breast. It has a yellow patch extending from the throat across the sides of the neck till the base, and hence is sometimes referred to as the Yellow-necked Bittern. Another alternate name is Mangrove Bittern. The feathers on the crown and nape are fairly long – almost long enough to be called plumes. The bill is relatively long and variable in colour, though generally dark – the upper mandible is dark brown to red brown, while the lower mandible is pale green or purple, sometimes suffused with a reddish tinge with a yellowish tip. It has dark grey, dark brown, black or olive green legs with yellow-green soles. The irises are yellow to red brown and the skin around the eye is variable, dusky to green or pink. The female is paler than the male, and has a yellowish wash to its underparts. The juvenile is similar, but has distinct fringes to its upperparts.

It is widely distributed across most of Asia, including East Pakistan, India (except Andaman & Nicobar Islands), South-east Asia, Indonesia and Philippines, as well as Australia, New Guinea and Solomon Islands. The nominate race, *I. f. flavicollis*, breeds in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, central and south China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. *I. f. australis* breeds in Indonesia, Papua-New Guinea (including Bismarck Archipelago) and coastal Australia. *I. f. woodfordi* is confined to the Solomon Islands. Birds of the Moluccas are sometimes separated as race *I. f. gouldi*. Populations are known to move in response to seasonal variations like rain or drought/water scarcity; they also disperse widely post-breeding.

Habitat & behaviour: The Black Bittern is solitary and usually seen singly, if at all – it is a highly shy and secretive skulker, and rarely seen out in the open. It inhabits both terrestrial and estuarine wetlands, especially the thick vegetation growing at the edges of densely forested freshwater streams, pools or other permanent wetlands, including grasslands, forests, woodlands, rainforests and mangroves.

Foraging and feeding is mostly nocturnal and crepuscular, usually trying to grab prey from a perch on shady trees over water, though it may also occasionally stalk prey slowly, or stand at a vantage point and wait for the prey to emerge. Its diet consists mainly of frogs, reptiles, fish and invertebrates, including crabs, snails, dragonflies, shrimps and crayfish. During the day, it roosts in trees or on the ground amongst dense reeds. When disturbed, it freezes in characteristic bittern posture (stretched tall, bill pointing up, so that its shape and streaked pattern blend with upright stems of reeds), or flies to cover where it would freeze again.

The territorial call is a characteristic loud drum-like booming, mainly heard during the breeding season, at day or night. It is a long drawn out, slightly descending *whoo-o-o-o-o*, uttered at roughly 15-second intervals. There is also a softer *coo-oorh* call, given when approaching the nest.

Nesting: The Black Bittern breeds generally between June and September, with some variation depending on amount of rainfall. Like other bitterns, but unlike most herons, nesting is solitary. The nest is a bed of sticks and reeds on a base of larger sticks, and is built in tree branches overhanging water, bamboo clumps, cane stands or reeds in swampy areas. The usual clutch is 3-5 blue or green-ringed white eggs.

Local name: The Black Bittern is known as *'Kala bagla'* in Hindi, *'Karuppu kokku'* in Malayalam, and '*Karuppu madayan'* or *'Karuppu narai'* in Tamil.

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For Private Circulation Only
Editors: Shanti Mani, Umesh Mani **Email:** bsap.pitta@gmail.com

For information, write to: Deccan Birders, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/bsap_online. **Website:** www.bsap.in. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*